

Stalin and Russia **1928-1939.**

By 1928 Joseph Stalin had gained complete control of Russia as General Secretary of the Communist Party.

Under the last of the Tsars, Nicholas II, some industry had grown up. However, the First World War and then the civil war had disrupted the country so much that industry had been set back. Most Russians were peasants in 1928. They had been given the land in 1917 by the Communists in the October Revolution. Some were doing well under the New Economic Policy (NEP). Farms were small and their methods old-fashioned. Many harvests were still cut by hand with a sickle and threshed by hand with a flail.

THE FIVE-YEAR PLANS.

Stalin wanted to modernise Russia, to make it an advanced industrial country. Modern industry also means modern agriculture. It needs a guaranteed supply of food to feed the factory workers. In the 1920s some peasants were holding back food in order to force prices up. Stalin could not let this happen and wanted to bring the peasants under state control. The Five-Year Plans therefore had to cover agriculture as well as industry. Stalin said the need for change was urgent.

One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beating she suffered because of her backwardness. She was beaten by the Mongols and the Turks,

the British and the French. Such is the law of exploiters, to beat the backward and weak. It is the jungle law of capitalism.

We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we shall be crushed.

Joseph Stalin,

Stalin's method of modernising Russia was through a series of Five-Year Plans. The plan was made by a central planning office called Gosplan. Gosplan laid down production targets for each industry to meet by the end of the five years. This was then used as a basis on which to draw up targets for every factory within that industry. Factory managers then had to calculate targets for every workshop, every shift and every worker.

You can see for yourself that only the oil industry reached its target. However, the 1932 figures are an enormous advance on the 1928 figures in all cases. If you then look at the figures for 1937, when the Second Five-Year Plan ended, this growth is even more amazing.

Agriculture.

These huge changes in industry could not take place without changes in agriculture.

For the Five-Year Plans to work, there would have to be new cities, with more workers. The peasants would have to provide not only food, but also workers.

The peasants would have to provide food for export as well. Russia would then get foreign currency to buy the machines which were not available there.

COLLECTIVISATION.

The Communists had never been popular among the peasants. The old Bolshevik Party had been supported mainly by workers and soldiers before the revolution. Under the NEP, farming was run on capitalist lines: each peasant ran his own little holding for his own profits. Some better-off peasants, the *kulaks*, did quite well. Lenin had discussed applying Communism to agriculture by setting up collective farms. Stalin now began putting collectivisation into practice as part of the First Five-Year Plan.

A collective farm is one which combines all the small farms of all the peasants in a village into one large unit. In theory, this single large farm can be run more efficiently. Fields will be larger, so machines, fertilisers and modern farming methods can be used. Few peasants before collectivisation could afford to buy tractors. Under Stalin, MTS (Motor Tractor Stations) were set up. Tractors from a MTS could go out to work in a group of collectives.

The most common type of collective was the *kolkhoz*. Here, villagers pooled their land, animals, tools and machines. They worked the fields of the *kolkhoz* and in return they were paid a share of the profits. They were also allowed to keep small plots of land of their own to grow vegetables and fruit and keep a few animals.

Put like this, collectivisation sounds a good idea. However, two points are ignored. First, collectives were set up at great speed. Second, collectivisation meant a great extension of state control and Communist Party control over the life of every Russian peasant. A collective was run by a committee of which the chairman was always a Communist Party member. The deputy director of every MTS was a member of OGPU, the secret police. The Five-Year Plans required certain crops to be grown in certain quantities. Some of these were crops for industry: cotton, sugar-beet or flax. Some were crops to feed the workers in the new factories of the growing cities. Each collective had to supply a certain amount (not a percentage) of its crop to the state regardless of the harvest. Stalin called this the 'First Commandment'. To the Russian peasants, these tremendous changes, which had to be carried out almost overnight, seemed to destroy their whole way of life.

ATTACK ON THE KULAKS.

The peasants disliked collectivisation, but the kulaks hated it. Stalin started an attack on the kulaks in 1928. He accused them of being 'enemies of the state' and of 'disrupting the economy'. He hoped to stir up jealousy among the poor peasants against the more prosperous kulaks so that they would accept collectivisation. However, the peasants objected to state control of agriculture, whatever their feelings about the kulaks. When the Communist Party officials reached a village, the kulaks were arrested and sent away at once, either to a remote area or to a labour camp. Any peasants who openly resisted the setting-up of the collective were shot. But resistance could take many forms.

Despite resistance, collectivisation went ahead ruthlessly. The kulaks disappeared. Those who resisted were put in labour camps. The rest were removed to Siberia or sent to work on the poorest land with large quotas of crops to hand over to the state. As far as we know, most of the four million kulaks died as a result of Stalin's policy. On the collectives, the rest of the peasants worked half-heartedly. Most had little experience with new crops and new methods. Sometimes, the experts sent in from Moscow made mistakes. Production of grain and meat fell between 1928 and 1932.

However, the First Commandment ordered a fixed quantity to be handed over by each collective to the state. If there was then not enough food left for the collective itself, then that was too bad for the peasants. Famine soon spread throughout the

Russian countryside. Probably as many as three million people died. For Stalin, however, agriculture had been brought under the control of the state. It could now play its part in the modernisation of Russia.

Industry

Look back to the tables of figures for industrial production on pages 69 and 70. Targets were not always met, but production did increase enormously. How was this achieved? The factories which were already there in 1928 obviously had to expand their production a great deal, but this would not have been enough. New towns, cities and industrial areas had to be built, some of them in entirely new areas. In the south, the Donbass area, and in Siberia, the Kuzbass and Magnitogorsk areas became industrialised. New factories were built in the Caucasus, the East and Central Asia, out of reach of foreign invaders. New cities, also, grew at lightning speed.

Stalin praised heroism of this sort in his speeches. Greetings and congratulations on their victory to the workers of the great Red Banner Works, the first in the USSR. The fifty thousand tractors which you are to produce for your country every year will be fifty thousand projectiles shattering the old bourgeois world and clearing the way for the new socialist order in the countryside.

Joseph Stalin, 1930

HOW WERE PEOPLE'S LIVES AFFECTED?

In order to reach their targets, the Russian people were called upon to make superhuman efforts. In most cases, they had very little choice: the targets were worked out and they had to be met. They worked long hours, and were fined if they were late. If workers complained about anything they were called saboteurs. Bad workmanship – even by a completely unskilled worker – was also punished as a crime. Women were expected to work in factories and nurseries were provided so that young mothers could return to work. Rates of pay were low and food prices high. The Five-Year Plans concentrated on heavy industry, so very few consumer goods were made. The shops were empty; clothes were dull and badly made and household items difficult to find. Housing, especially in the new towns, was cramped and poorly built.

A few workers did earn good money. Since skilled workers were in short supply, Stalin offered huge wages to foreign workers to come and work on the new schemes. The author of Source 3A quoted above could earn up to one hundred dollars a day. This was at a time when there was massive unemployment in Europe and the USA.

STAKHANOV.

Occasionally a Russian worker was made a hero: coal-miner Alexei Stakhanov shovelled 102 tonnes of coal in one shift in 1935. He was made a hero: given extra holidays, better housing and other privileges. 'Stakhanovism', as it came to be called, occurred in other industries. The result for the

other workers, however, was that targets were then set even higher and even greater efforts were expected of everybody. Stakhanovism was against the principles of Communism. Marx had written that people should be paid according to their needs. To Stalin, however, anything which increased production was allowed.

STALIN'S DICTATORSHIP.

We have seen how the Cheka was set up by Lenin to deal with opposition. Its powers increased during the civil war and, although the name was changed over the years (OGPU, NKVD), the secret police remained. Stalin's policies were bound to bring opposition. Anyone who spoke out against the Plans, or against Stalin personally, could be arrested. To be a kulak, or the son of a kulak, was a crime. Sentences were usually ten or 25 years in a labour camp. These labour camps were set up in areas where special industrial projects were to be built, often in remote parts of the USSR. Here the prisoners worked on dams, canals, factories and hydro-electric power stations. No wages were paid, and there was not enough food. The poor food and the harshness of the climate meant that thousands died. The NKVD simply replaced the dead with others.

Not all the work of *Zeks* (prisoners) was done in remote areas. Moscow's underground system was built by prisoners at great speed and with a huge loss of lives, as safety was ignored in order to get the work done quickly.

The millions of prisoners in the camps made a country within the country of the USSR. Eight and a half million people were arrested by the NKVD in the 1930s, whom about a million were shot. Others simply disappeared. Being taken away by the NKVD was the same as a death sentence. Wives, for example, were regarded as widows from the moment their husbands were arrested. In 1939, there were seven million prisoners living in the camps. The actions of the secret police meant that the rest of the people were scared into doing as they were told by Stalin.

STALIN'S PURGES.

Ordinary Russians who spoke their minds, or who were simply in the wrong class, made up most of the victims of the NKVD. However, Stalin also used the NKVD against leading Communists. He had reached the stage where he could not accept any criticism and he could not even bear anyone else to be popular. In December 1934, the popular Communist Party boss of Leningrad, Sergei Kirov, was killed in a car accident. The 'accident' was probably arranged by Stalin. Nevertheless, he put the blame on several other leading Communists. This was made the excuse for the first of his purges. One by one, the old Bolsheviks were arrested. Some were shot, but some confessed to ridiculous charges after torture, or in order to save themselves. At great show-trials in 1935 and 1936, leading Communists who had been Bolsheviks for 30 or more years 'confessed' to being American agents or Trotskyists.

After this, Stalin turned on the army and the Party. One-fifth of the officers in the army were arrested, tried and disappeared: half a million Party members went the same way: of the 139 members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, 98 were arrested and shot.

STALIN'S PERSONALITY CULT.

Not only did Stalin want no rivals for control of the country, he wanted personal credit for the USSR's successes too.

Stalin's picture appeared everywhere: in every school, office, station, factory, town hall and street. Many towns were named after him, like Stalingrad, Stalinsk and Stalino. Stalin was supposed to be the cause of every success: 'The country is being led from victory to victory by the steersman of the Party, the great Stalin.' Slogans about Stalin, songs, pictures and stories filled newspapers, cinemas, radio and school books. Pictures like Source 6 even made him out to have been more important in the past than he really was. The names of rivals like Trotsky were removed from official histories of the Revolution. Children were taught to think of him as the 'father' of Russia – and to tell the secret police if their parents criticised him. With this hero-worship on the one hand, and the terror of the NKVD on the other, only people slavishly loyal to Stalin could survive. Although the USSR was a Communist state, the dictatorship of Stalin was just as complete, and in some ways even more bloody, than that of Hitler. Make this comparison yourself and see if you agree.

Stalin's real name was Joseph Djughashvili; like other Communist leaders, he adopted another name while in prison. Stalin means 'man of steel'. He was from Tblisi, Georgia, in the south of Russia. His father was a factory worker who died when Stalin was eleven. His mother struggled to keep her son at school until the age of fifteen. At that age, he began training as a priest. The training was strict, the life was hard and Stalin rebelled. He began to read protest books, both Socialist and Georgian nationalist. He began to go to political lectures and in the end was expelled from the training college.

Stalin then began to work as a Socialist organiser. He encouraged strikes, wrote articles and made speeches. He was arrested in 1902, escaped in 1904 and returned to Georgia. By this time, he was a Bolshevik supporter, but in his remote Georgia, he played little part in Party matters. Here, he organised bank raids to supply the Bolsheviks with funds. When the revolutions of 1917 took place, he hurried to Moscow.

However, there were many more clever and exciting people among the Bolsheviks in Moscow at that time. Stalin was given unimportant jobs dealing with national minority groups, like the Georgians. He showed an ability to work hard at paperwork and was efficient at dull, routine jobs. Hardly noticed by others who were interested in ideas, policies, speeches and argument, he became General Secretary of the Communist Party. This became his power base.

As the Communist Party was now ruling Russia, it increased in membership and importance. Stalin dealt with Party organisation and soon, all over Russia, there were people who owed their positions to him. He also dealt with purges – removing people who opposed the Party leaders. This was another way of making the Communist Party of Russia into a personal tool of Joseph Stalin.

Lenin had warned the Party about Stalin's power, but they ignored his warning. When Lenin died, the other leaders joined Stalin to oppose Trotsky. With Trotsky out of the way, Stalin then removed the others. His extraordinary ruthlessness in pushing through the Five-Year Plans, industrialisation and collectivisation is described in this chapter. He also seems to have become almost insanely suspicious and jealous. The purges of 1934–35 shocked many Russians. Stalin's own wife committed suicide in 1932 following a purge at Moscow University, where she was a student.

When Germany attacked the USSR in 1941, Stalin used the same ruthlessness to defend his country. Any policy was followed which would help the war effort: even the Russian Orthodox religion, suppressed since 1917, was encouraged. Stalin showed personal bravery in staying in Moscow, within earshot of the German guns. The victory in 1945 was, like everything else, put down to the personal leadership of Stalin by the Soviet propaganda machine.

In the years after the war, Stalin built up the USSR as a superpower, in opposition to the USA. Eastern Europe became the USSR's new empire of satellites. Fear and suspicion of the West brought the hostility of the Cold War.

Inside the USSR, the long, slow task of rebuilding the country after the war began. There were more Five-Year Plans and the same hard work and dull, unrewarding life of toil. Just before he died in 1953, Stalin seemed about to launch another purge, this time aimed especially at Jews.

Stalin ruled the USSR for 25 years. They were years of unbelievable change for the USSR; they were also years when the USSR was Stalin's own personal empire.